

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 9NEW REPUBLIC
9 March 1987

Can the U.S. put the pieces together?

THE CONTRA CRACK-UP

FROM THE FRONT pages, it's looks as if the Nicaraguan *contras* have been fighting among themselves more than with the Sandinistas. Actually, they seem to be making progress on two vital fronts. On the ground, since early January about 7,000 *contras* have moved from Honduras into Nicaragua, for a total of 12,000. By spring the entire *contra* force of 20,000 men should be engaged in guerrilla combat with the vastly superior Soviet- and Cuban-backed Sandinista army.

On the equally perilous Washington political front, if all goes according to the Reagan administration's plans, just enough of the stain of the Iranamok affair will soon be washed away to inspire Congress to vote favorably on \$40 million in *contra* funding for the remainder of this fiscal year.

Imagery is the most immediately important aspect of the fight between Arturo Cruz and Adolfo Calero for the role of the *contra* movement's top civilian. Calero, the gruff former Coca-Cola manager in Managua, is the *contra* leader most closely associated with ex-CIA director William Casey and Lt. Col. Oliver North. Ever since Iranamok broke, it's been his task to explain—or avoid explaining—what U.S. aid reached the *contras* after Congress supposedly cut it off. The *contras* are bound to suffer as one investigating committee after another delves into the scandal; with Calero as the leading spokesman, it would be all the worse.

IF CRUZ takes over as leader of a reformed United Nicaraguan Opposition, as the Reagan administration has tried to arrange, the *contras* will acquire a new and more attractive face. Cruz is comparatively innocent of Iranamok goings-on. He has spent much of his time with politicians in Washington, and very little with the *contras* in Honduras. Ever since he threatened to resign, so many members of Congress have declared him indispensable to continued *contra* funding that it will be hard for a majority to vote no when the \$40 million comes up for a vote, probably in March. If a majority vote yes, the administration thinks it has a chance to get the \$105 million it is seeking for fiscal 1988 and to keep the *contras* fighting till the eve of the U.S. presidential election.

But public relations is only a part of the Calero-Cruz contretemps. There are also ideological and cultural elements, plus Washington interagency maneuvering. If Cruz does announce on February 19 that he's not resigning, it will be a victory not only for him, but for "liberals" against "conservatives," "politicians" against the "military" and the State Department over the CIA.

Contrary to many reports, though, the basic difference between Cruz and Calero is not one of "willingness to negotiate with the Sandinistas" versus "determination to win a military victory." Cruz may be somewhat more open to a negotiated settlement, but neither would accept a formula—such as Democratic Senator Christopher Dodd is trying to put into legislation—that would cut off U.S. aid to the *contras* without a guarantee of free elections in Nicaragua. A democratic future for Nicaragua is also the key ingredient missing from the Contadora initiative. It is the centerpiece of the proposal just put forward by Costa Rican president Oscar Arias, but it's too new to have been carefully considered by all sides.

Fundamentally, the reformed UNO under Cruz's chairmanship is designed to appeal to a Democratic Congress, if any *contra* arrangement can. After a transition period, the existing military coalition, the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), is to be dissolved and replaced by a new, unified national army operating under civilian control. Calero, currently head of the FDN, would be out, and the top *contra* military commander, Enrique Bermudez, would report to UNO, which would be expanded to represent Nicaragua's four traditional political parties—Liberals, Conservatives, Social Democrats, and Christian Democrats—plus labor, business, and the anti-Sandinista resistance operating out of Costa Rica.

Culturally and politically, Cruz and his ally from the old UNO triumvirate, Alfonso Robelo, are also far more compatible with American liberals than Calero is. All three spent time in jail for opposing Somoza, but Calero, a leader of the Conservative Party, left Nicaragua after the Sandinistas came to power in 1979. Robelo, a Social Democrat, and Cruz, a Christian Democrat, served on the revolutionary junta, and Cruz also was the Sandinista regime's ambassador to Washington. Both broke with the Sandinistas over the issues of Cuban influence and Marxist-Leninist oppression in 1982. "The fundamental cleavage is not really 'liberal versus conservative,' but between those who were Sandinistas and those who weren't," according to an administration official. "One side says, 'You guys were fooled before, so why should we trust you?' The other side says, 'You have no sensitivity for our people, or you would have joined the revolution.'"

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Culturally, says one *contra* supporter, "The Cruzes and Robelos represent the part of Nicaraguan society that were always notables and dignitaries—not oligarchs, but 'the good people'—lawyers, diplomats, and novelists. The FDN people are lower-middle-class—'7-Eleven managers,' somebody on the other side called them. Cruz was a blue-chip international civil servant [with the Inter-American Development Bank] before the revolution. He's a thoroughly decent man, but he seems almost incensed that the FDN people took the initiative and weren't coming to him."

PROVING THIS thesis, one of Cruz's associates described the Calero "clique" as "businessmen who weren't interested in politics until the Sandinistas forced them into it, who have no political culture, no political agility, nothing in common with the new young cadres who were Sandinistas, or with the young men in the camps who are doing the fighting." Most of the fighters, in fact, are peasant kids who have little in common with either Calero's businessmen or Cruz's educated elites.

Probably the most important difference between the Cruz and Calero groups is the role they've played in the *contra* movement so far. "The FDN people have been entirely focused on the war for eight years," said one American *contra* supporter. "They are fearful that politics somehow weakens the effort to get something going on the ground. On the other side," he said, "you have people with a good sense of the political problems—legitimacy, the lack of moderate and liberal support, the taint of past associations with Somocistas and the Argentines, the lack of the decent opinion of mankind. But, aware as they are, Cruz and Robelo are not very effective. They haven't accomplished very much. They claim they have always been frustrated by Calero."

The Cruz-Calero split has a parallel among American backers in and out of the government, some of whom are as suspicious of their adversaries as the Nicaraguans are. On Cruz's side are the State Department's Central American public liaison officer, Robert Kagan, and his boss, Assistant Secretary Elliott Abrams; moderates in Congress; and liberal Latin American specialists Robert Leiken and Bruce Cameron.

Calero has lost his key backers, Casey and North. He suffered a decisive blow when Frank Carlucci, the new White House national security adviser, decided it was necessary to opt for the "political approach" to save *contra* funding. Professionals at the CIA who formerly helped Calero freeze out Cruz now are obeying orders to accept State Department direction in *contra* leadership matters. Calero's last-ditch defender is Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina, and the State Department hopes that his railing will help win Democratic votes.

The Cruz takeover will be the latest in a series of *contra* reforms engineered in Washington. As U.S. officials explain it, the CIA set up the *contras* first as an army in 1981. Thoughts about a political agenda came afterward. In 1983, at the insistence of Congress and the State Department, the FDN was purged of its most notorious Somocista cutthroats. UNO was set up in 1985 to provide a political front, and last year, when Congress resumed military aid, its hand was supposed to be strengthened. But that didn't really happen because supplies inevitably went to the FDN and because the FDN didn't respect UNO authority.

The FDN formed a Council of Comandantes, some of whose members supposedly treated Cruz like an enemy spy on a trip to Honduras in December. He was denied the right to inspect *contra* books. And, when *contra* officers returned from military and human rights training in the United States wearing UNO arm patches, they were told to take them off. Cruz got fed up and decided to quit.

APPARENTLY HE really meant to leave, but during the first two weeks of February, his intention turned into a power play to force changes in *contra* management. Supporters say he began to reconsider leaving after a group of *comandantes* pledged support, members of Congress insisted on his staying, and Robelo implored him not to quit. Meanwhile Abrams, pushing hard for civilian dominance of the *contras* and his own dominance of administration policy, got the specific new reform package developed. On February 12, he held separate private meetings with Cruz and Calero. After a weekend round of telephone calls, Calero announced he was resigning from UNO, but not the FDN, and Cruz's supporters indicated he might be staying. The last requirement was a telegram from the FDN directorate, including Bermudez, supporting the reforms and, implicitly, undercutting Calero.

Assuming maximum success for all these stratagems, a vast amount of work has yet to be done. Cruz has got to make himself the true leader of the *contra* movement, not just Washington's figurehead. The *contras* have got to show that they can fight the Sandinistas and still respect the human rights of civilians. Cruz has to inspire hope for democracy—and, perhaps, evidence of resistance against Sandinista rule—among the Nicaraguan population. And he has to develop the missing decent opinion of mankind. Can he do it? Congress certainly ought to give him a fair chance.

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